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RR RUEHBZ RUEH DU RUEHJO RUEHMR RUEHRN
DE RUEHSA #1110/01 0881743
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 291743Z MAR 07
FM AMEMBASSY PRETORIA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8939
INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY COLLECTIVE
RUEHAR/AMEMBASSY ACCRA 0956
RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA 2046
RUEHBS/AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS 1052
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1151
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1043
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PRETORIA 001110

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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KPAO](#) [ZI](#) [SF](#)
SUBJECT: ZIMBABWE: QUIET DIPLOMACY GETS (A LITTLE) LOUDER

REF: PRETORIA 1054

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: South Africa's Parliament held an extraordinary debate on Zimbabwe March 28, with opposition parties strongly criticizing the Government's Zimbabwe policy. DepForMin van der Merwe defended the SAG policy, but stated that the GOZ's recent crackdown was a "major cause for concern" and urged the GOZ to "ensure that the rule of law and human rights" are respected. The previous day, DepForMin Pahad said that the economic situation in Zimbabwe is "reaching dire proportions." Pahad called the South African approach "constructive diplomacy," and pointedly complained about Western governments for criticizing the SAG Zimbabwe policy without making constructive policy suggestions. Van der Merwe's comments were the strongest to date by a SAG official and represent a shift toward a more critical and honest South African public position on Zimbabwe. END SUMMARY.

Parliamentary Debate on Zimbabwe

¶2. (SBU) The South African Parliament held a lively debate on Zimbabwe March 28, with Deputy Foreign Minister Sue van der Merwe in the difficult position of defending SAG Zimbabwe policy. Van der Merwe repeated many familiar SAG themes on Zimbabwe -- "inclusive dialogue" is key, Zimbabweans must solve their own crisis, sanctions are not helpful -- but also made the strongest statements to date by a senior SAG official on the Government of Zimbabwe's recent opposition crackdown. Van der Merwe said that:

-- the arrests, detention and assaults of senior opposition leaders are "a major cause of concern;"

-- stressed the SAG's "concern, disappointment and disapproval of the measures undertaken by the security forces in dealing with the political protests;"

-- urged the GOZ to "ensure that the rule of law and the human rights of the Zimbabwean citizens are respected;" and,

-- called on the GOZ to "create a climate conducive for political dialogue" and the opposition to "participate unreservedly" in efforts to solve the crisis.

¶3. (SBU) In a not-so-subtle criticism of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, van der Merwe said that South Africa has "avoided the temptation" to compete on "who

will shout loudest or trade the worst insults" against the GOZ leadership. Sanctions will only deepen the current crisis, in her view.

14. (U) Opposition parties strongly criticized the SAG Zimbabwe policy. Inkatha Freedom Party's Albert Mncwango said that South Africa "must denounce the Zimbabwean regime immediately, decisively, and irrevocably for what it is: a hideous and destructive dictatorship which must go." Democratic Alliance Chief Whip Douglas Gibson urged the imposition of smart sanctions against Mugabe, his wife, and cabinet ministers, so that South Africa is "no longer their place for luxury shopping." Gibson suggested that South Africa should offer Mugabe "a comfortable retirement and political asylum" if he would agree to leave power.

Pahad Highlights "Dire" Economic Crisis in Zimbabwe

15. (U) Van der Merwe's parliamentary remarks followed a March 27 press conference by her fellow DepForMin Aziz Pahad. Calling the South African approach to Zimbabwe "constructive diplomacy," Pahad said that the "economic situation is reaching dire proportions." Pahad said that Western governments -- whose statements on Zimbabwe are merely "self-gratification" -- should not criticize the SAG without making constructive policy suggestions. He repeated his comment from last week that if the international community had worked together to find a common approach on Zimbabwe "we would not find ourselves confronted with the crisis we do so today."

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16. (SBU) Responding to questions, Pahad said that Zimbabwe Vice President Mujuru's trip to South Africa (reftel) was "very private." SAG Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka met Mujuru at a meeting organized by an unspecified NGO, and the situation in Zimbabwe was not/not discussed. (NOTE: Several press reports and Embassy sources have told us that the situation in Zimbabwe -- specifically how to remove Mugabe from power -- was very much the topic of discussion. END NOTE.) He also reported that UK PM Blair has written a letter to Mbeki on Zimbabwe, although Pahad has not seen the letter. Pahad mentioned that Zimbabwean Reserve Bank Governor Gono had "presented a detailed report of the crisis in the Zimbabwean economy" to the SAG a month ago and seemed to suggest some sort of initiative on cross-party dialogue to solve the economic crisis (NFI).

Other SAG Officials Add Their Voice

17. (SBU) Two other respected SAG officials made encouraging statements this week. Deputy Chief of the Constitutional Court Justice Dikgang Moseneke said on March 28 that Zimbabwean judges could "count on (South Africa's) judiciary for the kind of solidarity and support that may facilitate the restoration of a democratic process." Reserve Bank Governor Tito Mboweni warned on March 27 that Zimbabwe's economy will continue to decline unless "policy changes" are made, stating that his colleagues in Zimbabwe were trying to tame inflation but that "constraints on the production side of the economy" must be removed.

Comment

18. (SBU) The South African Government's public position is becoming increasingly critical of the Government of Zimbabwe, largely because of growing domestic and regional pressure (as well as Mugabe's impossible-to-defend actions). While not yet using the words "criticize" or "condemn," van der Merwe's

prepared comments were the strongest to date, and mark a significant shift from the March 13 DFA written statement, which merely expressed "concern" about the reports of "difficulties being experienced by the political leadership" in Zimbabwe (reftel). The SAG is also being much more explicit in acknowledging the extent of the economic disaster in Zimbabwe (using terms like "meltdown" and "dire situation"), thus raising the stakes for its diplomatic efforts to end the crisis.

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